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The Lotus and the King: Imagery, Gesture and Meaning in a Hindustani Rāg

Laura Leante

This article brings together investigation of gesture and imagery in the study of North Indian classical music, focussing on a particular rāg—Śrī—in detail. The research, based on extensive ethnography and analysis of audiovisual recordings, reveals how the embodiment of sound as patterns of movement is a key to understanding how musicians associate particular images and emotions with rāgs, and at the same time how such processes of signification are intertwined with culturally embedded meanings.

The aesthetics of North Indian classical music is deeply rooted in cross-sensorial experience: from theoretical treatises to collections of rāgmālā paintings and accompanying texts, consideration of mood, emotion and imagery has long been regarded as essential to the appreciation of this art, and rāgs have often been described in imagistic terms, to the extent that B. C. Deva defined them as the ‘synaesthetic basis of Indian music theory’ (Deva 1981, 145).¹ In everyday practice too musicians make frequent recourse to images in the description of their music and in the transmission of their knowledge. Imagery is implicated in descriptions of rāgs as people or deities, or of music performance as the unveiling of the subtleties and the different aspects of these characters’ nature; at other times the rāg is explained as being like a story, whose events unfold through performance.²

However, in spite of the wide consensus about its relevance to the aesthetics of Hindustani music, so far this imagistic side has aroused mostly circumspect interest, as musicological analysis has not fully incorporated it. My argument is that a more holistic approach, bringing processes of embodiment and gesture into the equation, can reveal new ways to understand North Indian music and help bridge the gap between sound, emotion and image.

Analysing Imagery and Gesture in Rāg Music

Hindustani musicians, either deliberately or unconsciously, often accompany both their music and the description of the images and emotions it elicits with gestures. Through movement they clarify their depictions, or support techniques of sound production (see Fatone et al. forthcoming).

In his study of gesture in verbal narratives, David McNeill wrote: ‘Gesture and speech arise from a single process of utterance formation. The utterance has both an imagistic side and a linguistic side. The image arises first and is transformed into a complex structure in which both the gesture and the linguistic structure are integral parts’ (1992, 29-30). Extending this insight to the performance of music, one could suggest that gesture and sound arise from a single process of expression; that this expression has an imagistic and a normative side (i.e. the ‘musical grammar’); and that both sides contribute to the construction of meaning in performance. In other words, musicians attribute meanings to a rāg, and some of the images associated with these meanings can be expressed through movement. Gesture is a way to convey imagery and to embody and project qualities inherent in the meaning of a rāg.

I have discussed elsewhere how the study of imagery alongside gesture in music can reveal information which sound alone could not provide (Fatone et al. forthcoming). This is the case, for example, in teaching, where the employment of hand movements accompanying a

musical passage or embellishment can help to express and clarify some features that musicians would not be able to articulate verbally to their students.

I turn here to the analysis of *rāgs* and of the moods and images which musicians associate with them. In particular, I will consider how taking gesture into account can shed light on possible connections between imagery and music and offer insights on how musicians conceive a *rāg* and express the meaning they attribute to it through performance.

The perspective I adopt here draws on ethnographic research and on studies of semiotics and embodied cognition. In particular, my approach derives in large part from the work originally developed in popular music studies by Philip Tagg (1999). Tagg's methodology, based on Peircian semiotics, is heavily grounded in ethnography, a quality that gives it great scope for application in ethnomusicological research (Leante 2007). The method consists of carrying out extensive enquiries (among both musicians and non-musicians) in order to identify units of meaning (Tagg's 'musemes') within a piece of music: according to Tagg, the analysis of interviewees' extra- and inter-musical associations with a piece allows one to pinpoint such units. Then, through comparison with other occurrences of those or similar features within the same culture, it is possible to deduce the overall 'meaning' of that music within that specific context. Similarly, by conducting interviews with Hindustani musicians, one should be able to probe their own relationship with one or more *rāgs* (i.e. the feelings and/or the images they ascribe to them) and then to investigate shared meanings attributed to the music.

Among the concepts introduced by Tagg, two are of particular significance to the study of imagery and gesture in music. The first is the 'anaphone', the rendition by means of sound of a paramusical experience. As explained by Tagg and Clarida, '*anaphone* is analogous to *analogy*, except that instead of meaning "imitation of existing models... in the formation of *words*" (*analogy*), *anaphone* means the use of existing models in the formation of (musical) *sounds*' (Clarida and Tagg 2003, 99). Depending on the nature of the model they are meant to render, anaphones can be sonic, tactile or kinetic; of these (non-mutually exclusive) categories, the last is the most relevant to the object of this article. As renditions of patterns of movement, kinetic anaphones 'have to do with the relationship of the human body to time and space' and can be pictured as the movement of humans, animals or objects (Tagg and Clarida 2003, 100). For example, in the case of a musician performing a sustained note and describing it as 'stretched', the sound intended to represent the movement implicated in the physical act of stretching would be a kinetic anaphone. At the same time, the musician might accompany the description or the performance of that note with a gesture, for example by extending the arms in opposite directions, clarifying the image he associates with it.³

Tagg and Clarida add that 'kinetic anaphones can also be visualised ... as the subjectivised movement of objectively stationary objects or beings, e.g. the sort of movement the human hand makes when outlining rolling hills ... gentle waves on the sea, quadratic skyscrapers, jagged rock, etc.' (2003, 100). This is where processes of embodiment come more clearly into play and this is what leads to the second concept I am borrowing from Tagg, namely 'gestural interconversion', by which is meant 'a two way process that relies on anaphonic connections between music and phenomena we perceive in relation to music' (Tagg 2005, 4). Gestural interconversion is a process of projection and appropriation through gesture, where gesture mediates the qualities of different connotations arising 'within a given culture' from the same elements in a piece of music. In other words, different images and associations for a piece

of music can be explained as sharing characteristics when analysed not for their ‘unmediated objective qualities ... but from [the] gesturality, tactility and sensual perception’ that can be projected onto or appropriated through them (Tagg and Clarida 2003, 270-271).

In my previous research, for instance, I noticed how a particular melody elicited different reactions and images from different listeners: these diverse associations could nonetheless be interpreted as sharing a quality that can be expressed through a specific gesture of the arm (Leante 2007). Thus, the process of meaning construction is polysemic at one level—different meanings are attributed by individual listeners—while at the same time, at a deeper level, all of these meanings are grounded in the embodiment of the music.

In the following pages I present the results that emerged from the first attempt to employ this methodology in the study of North Indian classical music, based on the analysis of conversations with a number of musicians on their views on various rāgs, and on the feelings, images, or meanings—if any—they associate with them. All interviews were video-recorded in order to document and analyse movements or gestures which occurred during the conversations.

Here I will focus on one single rāg—Śrī rāg—as a case study based on fieldwork carried out over a four year period with a number of singers and instrumentalists (both soloists and accompanists) belonging to different North Indian stylistic traditions.⁴ Śrī rāg has already been the object of discussion in an article by Martin Clayton (2005) dealing with issues of non-verbal communication in Hindustani music and the classification of gesture in performance, and including reference to the possibility of analysing rāg music through imagery and processes of embodiment. The work carried out by Clayton on Śrī with khyāl singer Veena Sahasrabuddhe on that occasion provided the basis of subsequent—and quite lengthy—conversations with Veena herself, which convinced me of the potential of applying the methodology proposed here. In this paper I will take that study as a point of departure in order to investigate more extensively and systematically how a larger number of musicians relate to this rāg, how they conceptualise it, and how they project the meanings they associate with it through performance.

Śrī Rāg

Śrī is a rāg traditionally performed at sunset. It belongs to the Pūrvī thāt, a scale in which the second (Rsabhh, or Re) and sixth (Dhaiyat, or Dha) degrees are flat and the fourth degree (Madhyam, or Ma) is sharp (Figure 1). In Śrī, the ascending profile avoids the third (Gāndhār, or Ga) and sixth degrees, while the descending profile is heptatonic.⁵ The vādīs (main notes) are Re and Pa, the flat second and the fifth degrees. As Joep Bor explains, ‘Re is very flat and the most articulated tone in this raga, and many phrases begin and end on it. It is oscillated in a certain way, first using Ni or Sa and then Ga as a grace note. As can be seen in the characteristic phrase $\underline{R} / P—^P \backslash \underline{RG}—\underline{RS}$, Re has a particular relationship with Pa as well’ (Bor 1999, 146).

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The descriptions which musicians associated with Śrī during interviews and conversations were quite varied. Although certain images recurred (especially those referring to the time of day the rāg should be performed, such as ‘the sun setting’, the ‘red sky’ or ‘the birds returning home’), the individual depictions were rich with personal details, which probably also reflected the enthusiasm that many musicians showed when asked to talk about their personal experiences

and feelings.⁶ Nevertheless, it was not long before a connection between imagery, music and gesture started to emerge.

Śrī is generally considered a serious rāg conveying profound feelings, and difficult to master for inexperienced musicians. Some of the most recurrent images and emotions associated with it include those of an authoritative, calm and graceful figure, such as a sovereign, a hero, a warrior, or a yogi. This seems to be closely related to the meaning of the word 'śrī', an honorific prefix, often used for deities or men. According to singer Arun Bhaduri, for instance, this rāg is 'king-like, you know Mahādeva [Śiva]. [It's a] very strong mood, [he's holding] a trident ... Śrī is majestic' (15 February 2007; translated from Bengali). This description is similar to others reported in ethnomusicological literature (see for example Bor 1999, Kaufmann 1968, Martinez 1997) and to that provided by Veena Sahasrabuddhe, who depicted a confident, uncompromising, and experienced character:

In Shree ... there is not request ... I think Shree rag says that I've experienced all the worldly things and have come to the conclusion that this is my personality, this is my identity and I have perfectly tested everything and I am very satisfied, whatever I am. (Veena Sahasrabuddhe, quoted in Clayton 2005, 368)

On a later occasion, Veena offered more details on how she figures herself while singing this rāg, which seem to point to another, more devotional, dimension associated with Śrī: 'When I'm singing Śrī definitely in my mind I am singing in a temple, in front of Devi, Parvati' (18 May 2005).

Similarly, the image of a temple and of a deity was brought out also by singer Vijay Koparkar, who recollected a concert he had performed a few days before our meeting: 'There is a [Vithoba] temple ... [A] performance in front of God ... is a very rare opportunity ... and I was twenty-thirty feet from that Vithoba statue. I have started with Śrī ... [This rāg] gives the feeling of surrendering ourselves' (20 May 2005).

The divide between the depiction of a strong character and that of a devotional attitude towards a deity is not always neat, as implicitly suggested by the image provided by sitār player Deepak Choudhury, who associated Śrī with a white-haired man, riding a horse on top of a mountain (personal communication, February 2007), and—more explicitly—by another singer, Madhusudan S. Kanetkar, according to whom Śrī 'is a yogi, is a saint, it's a person staying ... in the Himalayas, ... lonely staying there, and while singing the posture is [of] grace' (10 December 2006).

Whether a yogi, a deity, a king or a commander, Śrī is often depicted as someone who has some form of authority, someone who enjoys a 'high status', who is in a 'high position'. I believe a related sense of 'elevation' can be expressed by the image of 'being in a high location'. Therefore the pictures described by Deepak Choudhury and Madhusudan Kanetkar juxtaposing a charismatic figure and mountains are not coincidental. This idea of 'standing in a raised place' and of seeing a wide open space was also conveyed by other musicians, including singer Sudokshina Chatterjee: 'Śrī is something ... heavy and spiritual and you think of ... the almighty ... of the whole universe ... I imagine myself on a big roof where I can see the whole city' (8 June 2006).

Commenting on his view on this rāg, sitār and tablā artist Nayan Ghosh provided what could be considered a summary of many of the aspects reported so far, i.e. the evening time, the sense of authoritativeness, of devotion, of surrender, and of physical elevation:

Imagine the glowing pink sky and the setting sun. ... Imagine yourself standing on the sea shore and ... the vast expanse in front of you, the ... stillness of the water in the evenings. If you are standing on a hill top, try to see the ranges of the mountains in front of you and the sun setting behind it and see the birds returning home. ... [I]t is the way you ... take the mīnd [glide] from Re to Pa ..., the way you feel for that glide and of course the ... character of the rāg, prayerful ... There's humility in it, but there's also a kind of virility in Śrī rāg. There is a hidden warrior-like spirit, but after all Śrī rāg is a peaceful rāg. ... Imagine a warrior offering his prayers before he goes to the battle field, ... his meditation, his prayer, his complete devotion and surrender to God ... because Śrī rāg has along with that peacefulness and the stillness, it also has a strong virility ... Śrī has a more direct attack on that Pa when you reach, ... though you take it with a glide, but you go with a certain confidence on the Pa. (Nayan Ghosh, 23 May 2005)

Nayan Ghosh's words make explicit reference to the music and in particular to the ascending glide from Re to Pa, a key interval, according to almost all musicians interviewed, in the definition of Śrī. As Nayan Ghosh pointed out, in the performance of this interval, the fifth degree should be reached with confidence, to express the strength and virility he attributes to the rāg. Most interestingly, the verbal description was accompanied by a gesture, as the musician raised his hand in a straight line, as in Figure 2. Nayan Ghosh describes the attack on the Pa using concepts such as 'confidence' and 'directness', which are also consistent with the descriptions of authoritative characters which cropped up in other interviews I have mentioned above.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Harmonium player Seema Shirodkar also performed a hand gesture when she explained how she associates an evening scenario with Śrī: 'Nobody likes the night [but] the sun promises, while leaving, that he will come back in the morning' (19 May 2005; translated from Hindi). Immediately after saying this, she sang the Re-Pa interval and she stretched her arm high in front of her as in the act of reaching out for something (the sun), and focusing her attention on the distance (the horizon below which the sun is setting).

In both Nayan Ghosh and Seema Shirodkar's cases, the Re-Pa slide can be interpreted as a kinetic anaphone (a musical rendition of an ascending movement) which can be expressed with a direct upward movement of the arm through a process of 'gestural interconversion'. Both gestures represent ways to embody and project some meaning relating to the images depicted.

These gestures also suggest links to other descriptions of Śrī. For example, earlier on I associated the idea of 'enjoying a high status' with that of 'standing on a high location', taking

the latter as a ‘translation’ in physical terms of the former: in fact, an upward movement of the arm could be the common denominator of the two images, being in either case a way to embody a feeling of projection towards a higher ‘position’, intended as both ‘place’ and ‘status’.

Seema Shirodkar’s interpretation of this *rāg*, though, introduces another image which recurred in other interviews: the idea of parting from something or someone. This separation is often viewed as temporary and is associated with the hope of reunion—be it with the rising sun, as in Seema’s case, or with a lover. *Sitārist* Kushal Das, for instance, sketched out the picture of a couple troubled by a recent quarrel: ‘You can think [of] a river, or [of the] sea, [or a] village scenery [where the] sun already set down, the light is there ... two lovers are there ... on that day they have some problem and they got separated’ (8 February 2007).

Studies on embodied cognition show how posture and arm motion can influence affective states (Barsalou et al. 2003). In particular, experimental evidence suggests that a gesture moving away from the body can convey a sense of ‘avoidance’, and a negative feeling (Cacioppo et al. 1993). Therefore Kushal Das’ idea of separation could result from the embodiment of the *Re-Pa* slide (which is so prominent in *Śrī*) through such an ‘avoidance’ gesture. This would relate to the feeling of parting. Nevertheless, since the *Re-Pa* is an ascending movement, this gesture would be oriented upwards, and somehow similar to Seema Shirodkar’s arm stretching out: I think it is such a similarity to a ‘reaching out’ gesture which gives the positive connotation bringing out ideas of ‘temporariness’ and hope of reunion after separation.

The path I have chosen through these quotations is just one of several different routes one could take. The images and the feelings attributed to *Śrī* seem to be part of a web of potential meanings somehow associated with ideas of ‘authoritativeness’, ‘devotion’, ‘separation’, ‘sunset’, and ‘being in a high location’, from which individual musicians draw in various ways to build their own image of the *rāg*. Figure 3 comprises an outline showing the different concepts emerging from the interviews and their possible interconnections.

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

In the statements quoted above by Nayan Ghosh and Seema Shirodkar, the musicians make a clear connection between imagery and a straight movement of the hand associated with the interval *Re-Pa*. In the latter instance in particular, the gesture was employed to describe the ‘confident’ quality of the slide reaching up from the second to the fifth degree of the scale. Another fascinating description occurs in an article by Sushil Saxena,⁷ in which the author commemorates *dhrupad* singer Rahimuddin Dagar and reports how, according to the artist, the ‘*pancham* of *raga shri* is *kamalvat* [lotus-like]; which means that, rising from the *rishab* slimly as a stem, the voice should open at *pa* ... so that the *pancham* may seem to bloom, like a lotus’ (Saxena 1976, 15-16). If one tries to accompany this description with a gesture, the rising ‘slim stem’ is inevitably associated with an upward straight movement of the hand and the arm.

Incidentally, in the same article Saxena makes quite a strong case for the consideration of synaesthesia and of a phenomenological approach to the pedagogy and experience of music. He also comments on the use of imagery in performance and notes how ‘a visual effect [can be] worked up through the medium of sound’ (p. 9), specifying that this should not be simply considered ‘imitation’; rather, he relates this process to Susanne Langer’s concept of ‘transformation’, which ‘consists in the rendering of a desired appearance without any actual

representation of it, by the production of an *equivalent* sense-impression, rather than a literally similar one' (Langer 1957, 98). Transformation implies the indirect representation of the 'significant aspect of the model ... by a device that abstracts only its significance without copying it directly' (ibid., p. 106). Interestingly enough, among the several examples she provides, Langer includes 'to get a spatial effect through a medium of sound' (p. 99). In fact, it seems to me that the step from both her and Saxena's discussions to Tagg's idea of gestural interconversion is quite a short one: different images worked up through sound can be analysed not just for their unmediated properties, but can be understood—'beyond the expressive medium' (Langer 1957, 107)—from the gesturality that can be projected onto them; this gesturality would be the result of the process of abstraction suggested by Langer.

Up to this point, the images and the moods associated with Śrī rāg appear varied, but nevertheless quite consistent: they tend to refer to a relatively limited number of concepts through which the individual musicians seem to create their own scenarios or characters. I have already proposed how some of these images could be embodied through a straight upward hand movement: either a firmer, more confident, gesture (like the one performed by Nayan Ghosh, for example, conveying a sense of authoritativeness and strength), or a 'reaching out' gesture (like the one performed by Seema Shirodkar, associated with temporary separation). One could even argue that the devotional mood sometimes attributed to Śrī can be interpreted in a similar way: for example, it could be intended as 'surrendering to and reverence towards' a god, and therefore it would imply an authoritative character. At the same time, though, one could make a connection between 'devotion' and feelings of 'being in a high place' by grouping them under a more general idea of 'elevation' (be it spiritual, physical, or social).

It is not my intention to suggest an exclusive relationship between the upward movement of the arm and the specific slide from Re to Pa. A series of complexities emerged, for example, in an interview with guitar player Debashish Bhattacharya, according to whom:

Śrī is a name for Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa and Śrī Kṛṣṇa is a symbol of love and that love requires dedication and [surrendering] which Śrī Rādhā has given to him. So it is embodiment of love and that love also has another part of it which is a cry. [It is like] when you don't reach with the lover. Rādhā [hasn't seen] Lord Kṛṣṇa [for] a long time, [and she is] praying for her Lord to come to her. That feeling is also there in Śrī and also after seeing her Lord, ... she touches his feet, pours [sandalwood essence] and flowers ... and that [surrendering] of love is also the other part of the Śrī. (Debashish Bhattacharya, 1 February 2007).

The images cropping up in Bhattacharya's description include themes already explored, such as separation with the hope of reunion, as well as the depiction of gods. With reference to this last point, one should not be disoriented by the variety of deities emerging from the interviews, as they seem to be consistent with the different pictures provided by each artist: Mahādeva holding the trident reinforces the sense of regal strength, Vithoba conveys a feeling of devotion, and Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā represent separation and love. Moreover, the divine couple helps us to understand the kind of love which is associated with Śrī rāg and sheds light also on references to love and romance in other interviews:⁸ these descriptions should be considered and

analysed as part of a culture in which the distinction between love and devotion is often blurred, and in which romance at times can be seen as closer to the idea of *pietas*—devoutness—rather than *eros*. This seems to be the case with this rāg and the images it elicits, Debashish Bhattacharya's description being particularly explicit and revealing in this sense. (This is also why I decided not to include a separate section for love in Figure 3.)

Even more interestingly, though, Debashish explained how he relates the Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā scenario to the music and pointed out that he likes to imagine the Re as Rādhā giving her offering at the feet of Kṛṣṇa, the Pa as the hope to see him again, and the Re in the higher octave as her cry for the separation. Like most of the other musicians we interviewed, he also commented on the importance of the Re-Pa slide in the performance of Śrī rāg. Nevertheless, when he sang a brief melody to explain his verbal descriptions, he emphasized the octave interval Re-Re and he accompanied it with a straight upward movement of the hand.

In a similar way, khyāl artist Chiranjib Chakraborty explained that, for him, singing Śrī is like 'you are chanting in front of god ... it is just like you are standing in front of [the] Atlantic or Mount Everest' (9 June 2006). He also added a short performance of two phrases—the first stressing the Re in the lower octave, and the second highlighting the Re in the upper one: the former was associated with the way he visualises himself, and the latter to the landscape he is depicting in his mind. Again, the performance was accompanied by a clear straight upward gesture of the arm. Interestingly enough, however, while the singer's imagery includes the depiction of a high location, his gestures highlight an attitude closer to feelings of devotion (Figures 3 and 4).

[FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

In my view, the statements and demonstrations provided by Debashish Bhattacharya and Chiranjib Chakraborty do not contradict the relevance of the ascending slide between the flat second and the fifth degrees of the scale noted above. On the contrary, their gestures—although associated with the ascending Re-Re interval—seem to confirm that there is a characteristic of Śrī rāg that can be expressed through an upward, straight, and confident movement.⁹

Śrī in Performance

How do the images discussed and gestures observed in conversations relate to gesture in performance? One obvious way to tackle this question would be to examine a performance of Śrī rāg by one of the artists interviewed. What follows is a series of considerations based on a concert Veena Sahasrabuddhe gave in 2003.¹⁰

The first step in the analysis was to see if and how the Re-Pa interval (which all musicians indicated as a distinctive feature of Śrī) was embodied and projected by the singer through recurring movements or gestures, and if any of the gestures would bear any similarity to those which occurred during the interviews. I concentrated my attention on the ālāp, as it is in this section of the performance that the mood of the rāg is first and most thoroughly expressed, and in particular on the initial part: here the tempo is slow and there is no explicit pulse, and the singer is less likely to perform beat marker gestures or movements punctuating melodic phrases,

the focus being more on the establishment of the notes and of the key phrases defining the characteristics of the rāg.

The length of the ālāp performed by Veena Sahasrabuddhe is approximately 18'30". The first occurrence of the Re-Pa interval coincides with the introduction of the Pa in the performance for the first time, and is unmistakably accompanied by an upward straight gesture of the left arm (throughout the performance her right arm is busy plucking the tanpura): when Veena sings the Re (04'42"), her hand is in her lap, but as soon as the voice starts to slide up to the fifth degree (04'46") she raises the arm to the height of her shoulder, where she holds it for most of the duration of the Pa (which is sustained for over five seconds). The upward movement of the arm is also accompanied by a slight lift of the head (Figure 5). In the following minute and a half the Pa is further established, and is always reached from the second degree; in six of the seven occurrences the Re-Pa interval is accompanied by the same hand gesture, and in most instances the singer also lifts her head and torso. This correspondence between the Re-Pa interval and the lifting of the hand (and often of the torso) recurs throughout the rest of the ālāp, especially until approx 12'00", when the tempo increases and the explicit pulse is introduced. From this moment on the singer frequently performs beat marker gestures, mostly tapping her knee or punctuating the melodic phrases with movements of her hand. Nevertheless, although the pace of the phrases is faster and the vādīs Re and Pa are less sustained, in several cases it is still possible to identify a stress on the Re-Pa interval, which is usually accompanied by the same gesture highlighted above.

[FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

The relationship between the upward Re-Pa interval and the straight hand gesture up to the shoulder is not an exclusive one-to-one mapping: in fact, the singer performs the same gesture more than once when reaching and sustaining the Sa, the first degree of the scale (for example, at 05'30" and 10'08"), and in one instance when establishing the lower Pa (at 04'06"). Similarly, she makes analogous straight upward movements of the arm when she establishes the main notes in the upper register, especially the Re; in these occurrences, though, the hand is raised higher than the shoulder. In brief, one can say that during the ālāp the singer tends to perform upward movements of her arm complying with the direction of the melody; but, among these, one in particular stands out—a straight, sustained and firm gesture—which recurs and often coincides with the Re-Pa interval and the establishment of the vādīs in the higher octave. Of the two kinds of gesture presented above—the one conveying a sense of 'firmness, confidence, and authority' and the other conveying a sense of 'reaching out'—Veena's arm (and head) movements in performance suggest the former, consistently with the character she had depicted during her interviews: I believe they contribute to the expression of the meanings she attributes to the rāg.

During the same performance of Śrī, Veena Sahasrabuddhe sang two bandiśes (compositions). The lyrics are, in both cases, of meditative and devotional content, consistent with some of the images that she suggested about Śrī. The first bandiś, 'Hari Ke Caran Kamal' ('Lord Kṛṣṇa's feet'), by D.V. Paluskar, is particularly famous, especially known through a widely available recording by Paluskar himself.¹¹ Many musicians made reference to this composition during our conversations. As it seems to be so well known, one cannot ignore the

contribution that Paluskar's bandiś has made to the process of shaping and diffusing the meanings which many associate with Śrī and, of course, in particular those expressed through images conveying a sense of devotion. Yet Veena's gesturality during the performance of the bandiś seems not to be explicitly related to the content of the lyrics: her gestures, in fact, punctuate melodic phrases, rather than put emphasis on particular sections or words of the text.

The Polysemy of Sound and Gesture in the Analysis of Śrī

The images arising from different interviews seem to point to a number of quite consistent meanings and moods associated with Śrī rāg by many of the musicians interviewed. Some of these images can be explained and projected through gesture: whether it conveys a sense of confidence or a sense of avoidance, it is an upward movement of the arm which musicians—mostly, although not exclusively—associated with the ascending slide between the flat second and the fifth degree of the scale.

Taking imagery and embodiment into account in studying processes of meaning construction in music requires the consideration of the polysemic character of both music and gesture: if the same sound can convey different images to different people, then the same gesture too can be employed to embody and project different images. This emerged quite strikingly from a conversation with sarod player Prattyush Banerjee (28 January 2007), who talked about Śrī while performing a series of gestures: these movements can be interpreted as a way to embody and express some images from the accounts in others sources too. For example, he described the way to approach the Re-Pa slide as the 'preparation of [a] bubble, ... just getting ready to burst out'; and while pronouncing these words he opened up his hand in a movement which could also easily express the 'blooming' Pancham of Rahimuddin Dagar's description (quoted in Saxena 1976, 16). Similarly, Prattyush tried to illustrate the confident character of Śrī by lifting his head and torso and opening his shoulders in a posture which conveys also the sense of heroism and majesty discussed elsewhere (Kaufmann 1968, 281; Arun Bhaduri, 15 February 2007).

By way of a summary of some of the aspects discussed so far and of the centrality of the polysemy of gesture in the interpretation of Śrī, Figure 6 presents both Prattyush Banerjee's movements and statements together with some other descriptions of the rāg.

[FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE]

Another Śrī?

The analysis of Śrī rāg presented in the previous pages is based on statements recorded during a series of extensive interviews carried out with musicians belonging to different traditions. Most musicians indicated the ascending slide between the flat second and fifth degrees of the scale as the distinguishing feature of Śrī, and the images they associated with this rāg could often be interpreted as resulting from a process of embodiment of an ascending, straight, melodic movement through closely related upward movements of the hand and arm. The divergences proved to be very few. Nevertheless, descriptions which do not fit into the pattern outlined above suggest another coherent pattern. This is restricted—among the artists interviewed to date—to two musicians who both learned Śrī rāg from the Dāgar gharānā, Ritwik Sanyal and Subroto Roy Chowdhury.

Although their description of the Pa and of the relevance of the Re-Pa interval seems to agree with other interpretations of Śrī, both artists put emphasis on the *descending* profile of the interval, explaining how the Re ‘comes from the Pancham’ (Subroto Roy Chowdhury, 25 June 2007) and the descending movement Pa-Re is ‘very strong’ (Ritwik Sanyal, 2 July 2006). Sitar player Subroto Roy Chowdhury added that for him this rāg has ‘a lot of tension ... it is suppressed desire ... it doesn’t open up’ (25 June 2007).

Dhrupad singer Ritwik Sanyal explained the way he conceives this rāg in detail, and he also demonstrated it in performance. He defined the ‘pulling of the Rsabh from the Pancham’ as the distinctive trait of the rāg and the Re as the rāg’s focus (cf. Bor 1999 above):

Of the five elements, Śrī is the earth ... you can feel this pulling. (Ritwik Sanyal, 1 July 2006)¹²

The āroh [ascending profile] doesn’t emerge, [the rāg] emerges in the avaroh [descending profile]. It’s all pulling down ... Re is the nucleus, Pa supports the Re. All the other notes get merged in the rsabh and finally the combination in Sa ... My Ustad was very particular about [the fact] that ... this is really the focus of Rāg Śrī. (Ritwik Sanyal, 2 July 2006)

The image of the earth drawing the melody down appears to be poles apart from other descriptions of the rāg. Ritwik Sanyal illustrated his explanations by performing short passages of Śrī and by accompanying them—as one would expect—with descending movements of the arms representing the pulling force he had talked about.

Analysing Ritwik Sanyal’s gesturality while he sings an ālāp in this rāg and comparing it to that by Veena Sahasrabuddhe presented above is not a straightforward task: the sample which I am considering here—one performance by each singer—is probably too small to allow any definite conclusions. In fact, one should ideally analyse more performances of the same and other rāgs by the two artists in order to be able to define with certainty what in their gesturality is related to the expression of the character of this rāg, and what can be ascribed to the musicians’ individual behaviour in performance. Notwithstanding this, a few hypotheses can be put forward. Ritwik Sanyal’s performance, for example, does not seem to show any notable gesture which could be analogous to Veena Sahasrabuddhe’s straight upward movement of the arm in coincidence with the ascending Re-Pa or Re-Re interval. Moreover, though in Sanyal’s ālāp too the movements of the hands and arms often tend to comply with the direction of the melody, his gestures seem to follow and accompany descending profiles more than those of Veena, who puts more emphasis on ascending intervals and slides.

This picture would be consistent with the divergences between the images associated with Śrī rāg by Sanyal and those which emerged during the other interviews discussed above. I am not implying that there are two distinct ‘Śrīs’, but there is clearly more than one way to relate to this rāg, and each way seems to present a coherent relationship between the music performed and the gesture and the imagery associated with it. The fact that both Ritwik Sanyal and Subroto Roy Chowdhury learnt it from the Dāgar tradition is undoubtedly an intriguing element which would deserve a more systematic enquiry: venturing a bigger step, one could in fact suggest that the

methodology proposed here could be a useful tool to investigate how different gharānās consider the same rāg and the meanings they attribute to it.

Methodological Considerations and Open Questions

The questions posed in the previous section are not the only issues which remain open in the present study. To start with, alongside carrying out extensive interviews to support the analysis of the music, Tagg's method of analysis also envisages trying to go beyond the 'particular' piece of music (or rāg) by investigating other occurrences of that music—or of some of its characteristics (for example anaphones)—within the cultural context studied. This can include enquiring about and tracing other extra-musical references and other pieces of music presenting the same or similar features (what Tagg calls the 'IOCM', 'inter objective comparison material'; 1999, 35-7); these should help shed light on the rest of the information collected. In both cases the possibilities are manifold. As for the latter, one option could be, for example, to consider the lyrics of compositions or songs written on a given rāg, as I have suggested about Śrī by mentioning the famous bandīś by D. V. Paluskar. Similarly, one could check if and how a specific rāg has been used in cinema: as far as the present case study is concerned, this is not an easy path to take, as Śrī rarely features in Bollywood films, and—at the time of writing—I have managed to locate only one such instance, a song—again—of devotional content.¹³

As for the presence of specific features of a rāg within a music setting other than that given rāg, making enquiries among musicians might be less productive. In fact, it seems to be the defining features of a rāg (e.g. the Re-Pa in Śrī) that are avoided in other rāgs (see Powers 1976): for example, no one among the musicians who talked about Śrī explicitly associated the ascending Re-Pa slide to any other 'similar' interval or feature in another rāg, as that would conflict with the distinguishing feature of Śrī. On the other hand, interviewees were often inclined to describe Śrī by highlighting differences with other rāgs—a kind of process of heuristic definition, which often clarified qualities of both the music and the images associated with it. For instance, recurrent comparisons with images elicited by rāg Mārvā turned out to be essential to realise that the feeling of 'separation and longing' sometimes attributed to Śrī was that of a 'temporary separation', and not a permanent state of loss. Likewise, reference to Puriya Dhanāśrī, a rāg set in the same scale and to be performed roughly at the same time as Śrī, confirmed the relevance and the distinctiveness of the Re-Pa slide in the latter.¹⁴

So far I have deliberately left aside the discussion of rāgmālā paintings, as the subject is highly controversial and any debate seems bound to lead to a dead end. Nevertheless, I believe that the issue cannot be entirely omitted from a study taking into account the relationship between imagery and music in North Indian classical tradition. In the specific case of Śrī rāg, a few correspondences stand out between the descriptions that musicians provided during our conversations and some elements present in rāgmālā illustrations from different traditions, areas and periods (see, for example, Ebeling 1973 and Waldschmidt 1967 and 1975). Śrī is often painted as a figure with authority and power (such as a king or a prince) in the act of listening to musicians¹⁵ or deliberating;¹⁶ other times he is depicted as a yogi, or a prince on top of a hill or a mountain.¹⁷ The colour of the sky often seems to be consistent with the description of sunset.¹⁸ Moreover, in several instances, Śrī holds a flower—in more than one case a lotus¹⁹—reminiscent of the 'kamalvat Pa' mentioned in Saxena's article and to the composition by Paluskar, in which the feet of the god are addressed, with a respectful expression common in Hindi, as being 'lotus-

like'. The image of the lotus, however, opens up countless semantic possibilities, including associations with ideas of purity, strength, and good omen, but also deities—especially Laksmī, Visnu, Brahmā, or Sarasvatī. This explains my choice for the title of this article, which brings together the image of an authoritative figure, a king—a common and fairly uncontroversial association for Śrī—and the lotus, a less central and possibly more contentious, but still recurring interpretation.

Of course, the long-standing objection to the study of rāgmālā collections and their relationship with music persists: although we have information on the musical content of Śrī rāg in the past, we do not know exactly what it sounded like at the time the paintings were made and this poses an obstacle to pursuing a research into possible connections between the two forms of art. Nevertheless, the meaning related to Śrī rāg would have been expressed—and possibly embodied—according to the musical concepts and practices of that period and to its cultural conventions.

My comments do not take into account issues of art history which a more thorough investigation should start from, and remain—at least at the present stage of the research—conjectures. Nevertheless, I must refer briefly to Harold Powers' remarks on Ebeling's observations. Ebeling suggests that rāgmālā paintings and music are linked not by a 'surface correlation of substantive detail or form but rather an underlying mutual basis in a general aesthetic of stylized conventions' (Powers 1980, 475), while on the other hand Powers highlights that this correspondence is a 'property which is as truly the essence of Indian classical music performance practice *today* as it is the essence of an iconographic system' (1980, 475; my italics). And, he adds, the way to understand the relationship between music and painting would lie in the study of the deeper lever of iconology and symbols. My impression is that such suggestions are not incompatible with the approach I have adopted in this article, as I have also gone through, in the previous pages, possible combinations of different visual, gestural and musical elements.

Captivating as these observations might be, though, I must keep to the main purpose of my analysis, which, far from being a chronological survey of Śrī rāg and its portrayals, is an enquiry into how a number of musicians at present relate to and express the meanings they attribute to it. In this sense, rāgmālā paintings still must be acknowledged at least as sources available to the collective imagination: whatever their historical meanings might be, these are pictures of Śrī whose elements could have influenced—consciously or unconsciously—the way a modern-day musician thinks of this rāg.

At the beginning of this article I suggested that some of the images associated with this rāg can be explained with its name, which is commonly used as an honorific prefix to address illustrious men or gods. Several musicians made reference to this, explicitly or implicitly. At a closer look, however, this word can open up more possibilities of interpretation: many of the images ascribed to this rāg and which were explained above as possibly resulting from a process of embodiment of music, at the same time can be traced back to the rāg's name. The Sanskrit word 'śrī', in fact, is not just an honorific term, but can refer to 'flaming', 'diffusing light', 'radiance', 'lustre', 'splendour', 'glory', 'grace', 'beauty', 'auspiciousness', 'high rank', 'majesty', and it is also used as a name for Laksmī and Sarasvatī (Monier-Williams 1988).

It is easy to find in this short list many references to and connections with several of the images discussed above, from the redness of the sunset sky, to the king and—perhaps—also to

the lotus, traditionally associated with Lakṣmī. However, none of the musicians interviewed made direct reference to these meanings and I have no reason to believe that the meaning they attribute to the rāg is necessarily mediated through them. When musicians talk about the meaning of the word 'śrī' they refer to 'a king', or 'Śiva', or 'Kṛṣṇa'; images such as 'radiance' or 'splendour' can be interpreted—at least within the cultural context discussed here—as connected to the description of a figure with high status. But for other interviewees, similar ideas of 'radiance' or 'diffusing light' (together with other associations, like the lotus flower) cropped up in descriptions of moods and images elicited by the rāg far from the depiction of a character with authority. Still, most of these images can be explained as resulting from the embodied projection of an upward ascending slide. Therefore, although in the previous pages the embodiment of sound as patterns of movement emerged as a key to understanding how musicians associate images and emotions with Śrī, at the same time such processes are intertwined with culturally embedded meanings; the boundaries between the two are often blurred.

Conclusion

We have seen that there seems to be a web of semantic possibilities around Śrī: some of the images and ideas encountered appear to be widely shared, others are more individual. Nevertheless, in the vast majority of cases the images associated with Śrī have proven to be quite consistent. These include the depiction of Śrī as a person with authority and high status (such as a prince, a king, a hero or a saint); the association with a sense of being in a high location; a feeling of devotion and surrendering; and the idea of reaching out for something or of temporary separation. There is not a neat divide between these groups, and often the responses overlap (Figure 3), as musicians seem to draw variously on these images to shape the individual meaning each one of them ascribes to the rāg. I have suggested how these images can be better understood if analysed for their inherent kinetic qualities and in particular as emerging from a process of embodiment of an ascending straight slide (mostly the Re-Pa interval and—less often—Re-Re interval). The movement resulting from such embodiment can be projected through an upward arm gesture—either as in the act of reaching out for something (conveying a sense of avoidance) or, closer to the chest, in a more assertive manner (to convey a sense of strength and confidence). Polysemy of sound and of gesture both come into play.

The discrepancies from the majority of meanings elicited by this rāg, although few, proved to be consistent and referable to a single tradition: preliminary analysis presented here seems to suggest a different way of relating to this rāg, which deserves further enquiry. This is not the only aspect that remains open to research, though. For instance, an investigation of the reception of Śrī amongst audiences will add another dimension to this study (Leante, forthcoming).

Through the analysis of this rāg, I have tried to show how sound, gesture and imagery are three facets of a single process of meaning construction in music. An interdisciplinary approach taking into account imagery and processes of embodiment can shed light on how music is constructed, transmitted, received.

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¹ Investigation of the transmission of rāgs in texts and treatises falls beyond the scope of this article; the rāgmālā tradition will be referred to in the following pages.

² For example, Deepak Choudhury and Tarun Nayak (personal communications, February 2007).

³ Other examples include the performance of quick embellishments associated with the image and to the act of 'tying knots', and the description of specific melodic phrases through comparison to the behaviour of elastic bodies and through gestural representation of object motion (Fatone et al. forthcoming).

⁴ The interviews were mostly carried out in the UK and in India. Fieldwork in India took place in the regions of Maharashtra (May 2005 and December 2006, with Martin Clayton and Jaime Jones), and West Bengal (January/February 2007, with Martin Clayton, Tarun Nayak, Mark Doffman, and Andrew McGuinness). The interviews with Ritwik Sanyal were carried out in Rome (June 2006, with Richard Widdess and Martin Clayton).

⁵ See for example Bor (ed.) 1999, 146-147, and Kaufman 1968, 280-284.

⁶ It should be mentioned that, although Śrī proved to be a rāg which most interviewees were happy to talk about, some musicians preferred to discuss other rāgs or topics and didn't feel compelled to provide answers to questions about Śrī. In some cases this seemed to simply depend on a lesser familiarity with the rāg, especially by younger musicians who had not mastered it as part of their core performance repertory. Also worthy of note is the fact that only an extremely limited number of musicians among those interviewed mentioned the concept of rasa during our conversations, hence the decision not to discuss rasa theory in this article.

⁷ I am grateful to Richard Widdess for referring me to this article.

⁸ Apart from the interview with Kushal Das quoted above, similar concepts were brought up, for example, by Sudokshina Chatterjee (8 June 2006) or Prattyush Banerjee (28 January 2007).

⁹ As I pointed out above, I do not intend to suggest a simple exclusive correspondence between gesture and a specific interval of the rāg. Although here I am focusing on the possibility for gesture to express some quality of the music and some meaning associated with it, it must be kept in mind that gesture (consciously or unconsciously) is also employed by the musicians for other purposes, such as—for instance—time keeping, or interaction with fellow musicians or audience (Clayton 2007, and Fatone et al forthcoming).

¹⁰ The performance was filmed by Martin Clayton in April 2003, in Mumbai, India (British Academy grant no. SG35623). Clayton himself has made reference to this video in his 2005 article. More recently he analysed a short excerpt from the ālāp (from 12'35" to 13'21") in his study of processes of entrainment between musicians in North Indian classical music (see Clayton 2007).

¹¹ D. V. Paluskar. 1999. *Bhajan. Payo Ji Maine Ram Ratan Dhan*. The Gramophone Company of India. CDNF 150264.

¹² Sanyal's reference to the Ayurvedic elements is reminiscent of a much older theoretical tradition in North Indian music tracing a link between these elements, cosmology and meanings attributed to rāgs (see for example Butler Brown 2003/2004).

¹³ The song, entitled 'Prabhu caranon mein' is taken from the movie *Andolan* (1951) and can be found at http://chandrakantha.com/raga_raag/film_song_raga/shri.html (accessed on 30 January 2009).

¹⁴ Veena Sahasrabuddhe, 16 December 2006.

¹⁵ See for example Ebeling 1973, plate C42, Waldschmidt 1975, fig 21, 23, 24

¹⁶ See Waldschmidt 1975, fig 18.

¹⁷ See respectively Ebeling 1973, fig 106 and Waldschmidt 1967, fig 59.

¹⁸ See for example Bor 1999, table 38.

¹⁹ See for example Waldschmidt 1975, fig 18.